Where Everything Began

—“But Heaven ain't close in a place like this, Anything goes but don't blink, you might miss.”

The Killers - Somebody Told Me

The morning Bangkok sun rose with a heavy, deliberate slowness, cutting through the humid air like a dull blade. It didn't bring warmth so much as a stifling, inescapable weight, pressing the moisture down onto the city streets until the asphalt seemed to sweat.

The park near the old boarding school was entirely empty at this hour. The usual chaotic symphony of Bangkok traffic was muted here, pushed to the background, replaced instead by the raw, nostalgic smells of wet concrete, rusted playground chains, and fresh-cut grass drying in the heat.

It was a space frozen in time. A graveyard of forgotten afternoons. A place where the ghosts of who they used to be still haunted the corners, still lingered on the rusty swings, still whispered from behind the old concrete walls.

The walls were the same. The asphalt was the same. The playground was the same, just older, just more worn—like the two boys who had once hidden here and called it love.

A suffocatingly hot Bangkok afternoon flickered at the edge of Nut's consciousness as he walked through the back gates. Two boys huddled under a dense, dripping canopy of an old rain tree, sharing a single, rapidly melting ice cream. The sweetness dripped down their fingers, sticky and ordinary, while they listened to music through cheap wired headphones.

Nut could still feel—with a clarity that made his chest ache—the exact, grounding weight of Hong leaning his head against his shoulder. Back then, everything was easy.

In that memory, Hong's laugh was light, perfectly clear, untainted by the smoky, raspy friction that years of late-night cigarettes would later carve into his throat. He had looked at Nut with completely bare eyes, holding out a single pinky finger in the deep shade of the back gate.

"Don't forget this," he had demanded, his voice fierce with teenage certainty. "No matter what happens."

The memory shattered against the sharp, metallic screech of a rusted playground chain.

A stray gust of humid wind had caught the old swings. Nut blinked away the phantom shade of his fifteen-year-old youth, the heavy, sweltering air of the present day grounding his sneakers back into the gravel path.

The boy from the memory was gone.

In his place stood the silver-haired man leaning against the stained concrete wall.

Nut stood frozen at the entrance to the gravel path, his chest so tight he could barely draw breath. His eyes were completely fixed on the messy silver hair and the uncovered, unmasked face of the boy who had finally, truly, returned. Without the eyeliner. Without the performance. Without anything but the raw, bleeding edge of who he used to be.

"Hi." Hong said. The word was small. The word was everything.

Nut didn't move. He couldn't move. The sight of Hong like this—undefended, unprepared, terrified—was too much to process. Eight years of carefully constructed distance evaporated in a single syllable.

"You came," Hong continued, his voice cracking slightly on the air. His bare eyes were searching Nut's face for a map of the damage he had caused. For forgiveness. For something Nut wasn't sure he could give yet.

Nut still didn't answer. He walked forward slowly, his sneakers crunching against the gravel, until he reached the rusty swings. He sat down on one, gripping the chains so tightly his knuckles turned white. Hong remained against the wall, as if he wasn't sure he had the right to move closer.

The space between them felt miles wide.

"You don't get to stand there looking like the boy I lost eight years ago and act like a single 'Hi' fixes a week of dark rooms," Nut said finally. "You don't get to disappear and then show up looking like that and expect me to just fall back into your arms."

Hong flinched, but he didn't retreat. "I know."

"Do you?" Nut's grip tightened on the chains. "Do you actually understand what you've done? What you've been doing since you came back?"

Hong closed his eyes. "No. I don't think I do. Tell me."

"You left without saying goodbye." The words came out sharp, accusatory. "You vanished in the middle of the night, and the next morning your desk was empty. Your phone was a different number. Your social media disappeared. And then six years later, you just show up in Bangkok like nothing happened."

"I know."

"You don't get to just say 'I know' like that absolves you." Nut's voice cracked. "I waited for you. Do you understand that? I spent three years thinking you might contact me. Three years checking my phone every time it buzzed, thinking maybe—maybe you'd finally figured out how to reach me. And then after a while, I stopped waiting. I thought you'd moved on. I thought you'd decided to just... erase me."

Hong opened his eyes. They were wet.

"And then you came back," Nut continued, his voice dropping dangerously low. "You came back, and I thought—God, I thought maybe we could have this. Maybe we could figure out what happened and move forward. But you didn't even acknowledge me at first. You spent months acting like we were strangers. And when you finally did start spending time with me, it was—" He stopped, unable to articulate the confusing tangle of hope and hurt that had been his constant companion these past weeks.

"It was what?" Hong asked softly. He finally stepped away from the wall, walking to the second swing beside Nut. He sat down carefully, as if afraid the old metal might betray him. "Tell me, Nut. Please."

Nut looked at him—at the undefended face, the messy silver hair, the exhaustion carved into every line. This was the Hong he'd been waiting for without knowing it. The Hong who was finally brave enough to sit here, unmasked, and ask to be told the truth.

"It was painful," Nut said finally. "Because I realized you were waiting too. You were as scared as I was. And I didn't know how to bridge the gap between who we were and who we've become."

Hong gripped his own swing chains. "I didn't know how to come back to you."

"Then why did you?" Nut asked. "Why the phone call? Why this place? Why now?"

Hong was quiet for a long moment.

"Because Lego was right," Hong said finally. "Because I was destroying myself and everyone around me by hiding. And because—" His voice cracked. "Because I couldn't live with the silence anymore. Nut, I spent seven days in my apartment smoking and drinking and hating myself, and all I could think about was you. How I'd hurt you. How I'd abandoned you. How I didn't have the right to feel jealous or abandoned when I was the one who chose to disappear."

"You didn't choose to disappear," Nut said quietly. "Your mother took you."

Hong's hands curled into fists. "I should have fought harder. I should have found a way to contact you. I should have—"

"You were fifteen years old," Nut said. "You didn't have the power to fight back

against your mother. You didn't have the resources to find me. You did what you could to survive. That's not the same as choosing to leave me."

"But I did choose to stay away when I came back," Hong said. His voice was small, barely audible above the distant hum of Bangkok traffic. "When I finally got to Thailand, when I finally had the freedom to reach out to you, I didn't. I was too ashamed. Too afraid of what I'd become. Too scared that you'd look at me and see someone you didn't recognize."

Nut turned on his swing to face Hong fully. "I'm going to tell you something, and I need you to listen very carefully. I've had eight years to think about what happened between us. And I've come to a conclusion."

Hong looked at him, his bare eyes wide with apprehension.

"Losing you," Nut said, his voice steady despite the emotion beneath it, "was the most painful thing that's ever happened to me. But I survived it. And every day after that, I survived it again. And somewhere in all that surviving, I kept a piece of you with me. A piece of the fifteen-year-old boy who looked at me like I was the most important person in the world."

"Nut—"

"Let me finish." Nut's hand came up, his fingers hovering near Hong's face but not touching. "When you came back, it was like that piece of me suddenly had a name again. It was suddenly a real person instead of a ghost. And I didn't know what to do with that. I was angry at you for leaving. I was angry at myself for still caring. I was terrified that if I let you in again, you'd just disappear again."

"I'm not going to disappear," Hong said. "I know I have no right to make promises, but—"

"I didn't finish," Nut interrupted gently. "I'm telling you this because I need you to understand something. The reason I was so focused on Est—the reason I was so desperate to figure out who you were jealous about—was because I was trying to move on. I was trying to convince myself that I could just be your friend, that I could just help you settle into Bangkok and move forward. But it didn't work. Because every time I looked at you, I felt it. The same pull I felt at fifteen. The same need to protect you. The same—" He paused, searching for the right word. "The same love."

Hong's breath caught audibly.

"I didn't stop loving you," Nut continued. "Not for a single day. Not when you were in China. Not when I thought you'd moved on. Not when you were standing next to me acting like we were strangers. I never stopped, Hong. And I think maybe you didn't either."

Hong was crying now—silently, tears streaming down his unpowdered cheeks, his whole body shaking with the effort of holding back sobs.

"It wasn't just a teenage thing," Nut whispered. "Is it?"

Hong shook his head violently. "No. God, no. I thought—I thought maybe if I stayed away long enough, I could convince myself it was just nostalgia. That I was just chasing a memory. But when I saw you again, when I actually saw you, I realized I'd been lying to myself. You're not a memory, Nut. You're—you're the thing that's been missing from me since the day I left."

Nut reached out slowly, giving Hong time to pull away if he wanted to. Hong didn't. Instead, he leaned into the touch, his cheek pressing against Nut's palm as if the contact was the only thing keeping him grounded.

"I was afraid," Hong said, his voice muffled against Nut's hand. "When I saw you at Lego's show. I was afraid you would hate me. Afraid you would have moved on. Afraid that everything we had was—was just a teenage thing. Something that didn't survive growing up."

Nut's thumb traced the curve of Hong's cheekbone. "It wasn't just a teenage thing. And you know how I know that?"

"How?"

"Because I'm looking at you right now, and I feel exactly the same way I felt at fifteen." Nut stood up from his swing, pulling Hong gently to his feet as well. "My heart is racing. My hands want to hold you. My whole body is vibrating with the need to be close to you. That's not nostalgia. That's not a memory. That's—"

"What?" Hong's voice was barely a whisper.

"That's love. Still. After everything. Still."

Hong closed his eyes, and a sob escaped his throat—the sound of eight years of accumulated grief and longing finally finding release.

"I don't deserve it," Hong said. "I don't deserve you waiting. I don't deserve you still —"

"That's not for you to decide." Nut reached up with both hands, cupping Hong's face and holding him steady in the bright morning light. "I decide what you deserve from me. And I've decided that you deserve everything. The waiting. The wanting. The years of wondering. The hope that kept me going. The love that never went away."

"Why?" Hong asked, his eyes searching Nut's for some kind of explanation, some logic that made sense.

"Because you're still you," Nut said simply. "Different hair. Different clothes. Different armor. But underneath all of it, you're still the lonely boy in the library who pretended he didn't want company. You're still the person who saw me and let me see you. You're still—"

He stopped, the words getting tangled, too much raw emotion for language to contain.

"I'm still what?" Hong asked, his voice breaking on each word.

Nut leaned his forehead against Hong's, their breath mingling as the morning sun filtered through the rain tree, painting them in gold and orange light.

"You're still mine," Nut whispered. "You've always been mine. Even when you were gone. Even when I thought I'd lost you forever. Some part of me knew—some part of me always knew—that you'd come back. That we'd find each other again. That this —" He gestured between them, at the space that was shrinking, at the gravity pulling them together. "That this wasn't finished."

Hong made a sound—half laugh, half sob. His hands came up, gripping Nut's shoulders under the heavy denim jacket, pulling him closer until their bodies were pressed together, until there was no distance left to bridge.

"I'm sorry," Hong said. "For leaving. For the silence. For the years of—"

"Stop apologizing," Nut said gently.

"I can't. I need you to know—"

"I know." Nut pulled back just enough to look at Hong's face. "I've always known. I knew the day you left that it wasn't your fault. I knew when I didn't hear from you that you were being kept from me. And I knew the moment you walked into that studio and looked at my tattoo designs that you'd never really gone away. You were just waiting for the right moment to come home."

Hong's lip trembled. "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to be the person you deserve."

"You already are," Nut said simply. "You're here. You're honest. You're brave enough to show me your face without all the armor. That's all I need."

They stood like that for a long moment, wrapped in each other.

"What now?" Hong asked finally, pulling back just enough to see Nut's face.

Nut smiled—a real smile, full of warmth and certainty and the specific, overwhelming joy of someone who had finally been given what they thought they'd lost forever.

"Now we figure it out," Nut said. "Together. The way we should have figured it out eight years ago."

"Together," Hong repeated, testing the word. Finding that it fit.

"Together."

Hong smiled—a real smile, open and unguarded, the exact smile of the boy Nut had fallen in love with at fifteen. It was tentative, like he wasn't quite sure he had permission to be this happy. But it was real, and it was his.

"I love you," Hong said. "I never stopped. I tried so hard to move on, to convince myself it was over, to build walls and armor and all the defenses that were supposed to protect me from this feeling. But I never stopped loving you. Not for a single day."

"I know." Nut kissed him then—not the clumsy, uncertain kiss of two teenagers figuring things out behind a gymnasium. This kiss was deliberate, intentional, the kiss of two adults who knew exactly what they wanted and had spent years wanting it.

Hong kissed back with an equal, desperate intensity—hungry. His hands went everywhere at once: clutching Nut's shoulders, his back, his face, touching and touching as if he needed to confirm that the gravel path, the morning sun, and Nut himself were entirely real.

When they finally pulled apart, they were both breathing hard.

"I never stopped either," Nut said, his hand remaining in Hong's silver waves, his fingers tracing slow circles against his scalp. "Not for a moment."

They weren't fixed, and they weren't whole in the sense of never having been broken. But they were complete in the sense that the missing piece had finally been restored, and the puzzle was assembling into something that made sense.

Hong in his arms. Hong's heart beating against his chest. Hong's voice saying "I love you" and meaning it with every fiber of his being.

This was what he had been waiting for.

This was what he had always been waiting for.

By the time they made it back to Nut's apartment, the sun was high and merciless, turning the city into a shimmering heat mirage. Neither of them had checked their phones. Neither of them cared about the time or the world waiting outside the thin walls of Nut's sanctuary.

Hong sat on Nut's bed—the same bed where he'd spent countless nights imagining this moment—while Nut brought him water and the first meal they'd shared in eight years. Simple things. Impossible things.

"Tell me about China," Nut said, sitting beside him.

And Hong did. He talked about the gray apartment in Beijing where his grandparents had kept him under lock and key. About the school where nobody knew him, where he had to rebuild his entire identity from scratch. About the shame that had been driven so deep into his bones that it took eight years and a group of friends to finally excavate it.

"My mother said I was sick," Hong said quietly. "Like loving you was a disease that needed treatment. That I just needed to find the right girl and I'd be normal."

Nut's grip on his hand tightened. "You were never sick. You were never wrong. You were just young and in love with the wrong person's son."

"Were you the wrong person?" Hong asked, a small smile playing at his lips.

"No," Nut said firmly. "But my father certainly thought so. Do you know what he said when I told him about you? He asked me if I was trying to embarrass the family."

Hong laughed—a broken, surprised sound. "Your father's a plastic surgeon."

"Exactly. He spent his career cutting people apart and putting them back together 'correctly.' He couldn't fathom the idea that love might be something you don't need to fix." Nut leaned his head against the wall, pulling Hong to rest against his shoulder. "I didn't tell him the truth about what happened to you. I just let him think you'd moved on. That we'd grown apart. It was easier than fighting."

"Is that why you stopped trying to reach me after a few years?"

Nut was quiet for a moment. "I tried for longer than that. But eventually, your number was disconnected. Your emails bounced back. I tried to find you through mutual friends, but nobody knew where you were. It was like you'd been erased."

"I wanted to contact you so badly," Hong said. "But my mother monitored everything. Every letter, every email, every phone call. When I turned eighteen, I thought about reaching out, but I was so deep in the lie by then. I'd convinced myself that you'd probably found someone else. That you'd probably hated me for disappearing."

"I could never hate you," Nut said. "Not even in my darkest moments of anger and confusion. Even when I wanted to hate you, I couldn't. Because underneath all the anger was just this—" He gestured vaguely at the space between them. "This need to know you were okay."

"I'm okay now," Hong said softly. "I'm okay because you're here. Because you waited. Because you didn't give up on me the way I gave up on myself."

Nut pulled back to look at him, studying his face as if he was trying to memorize it all over again. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you never have to be that scared again."

"That's a big promise," Hong said.

"I know." Nut reached out and traced the sharp line of Hong's jaw, following the contour of a face that had changed but remained fundamentally the same. "But it's one I'm willing to keep. For however long you'll have me."

Hong turned his head, pressing a kiss to Nut's palm. "I'll have you for as long as you'll have me. Is that fair?"

"More than fair," Nut said.

They lay back on the bed together, tangled in each other, talking until the afternoon light shifted and changed. Hong told him about his music, about the compositions he'd been writing that nobody had ever heard—soft, melodic pieces that contradicted his Rebel persona entirely. Nut told him about his tattoo clients, about the specific care he took with each design, about how understanding the human body had become his meditation.

And somewhere in the middle of the conversation, Hong fell asleep, his head on Nut's chest, his breathing soft and even and peaceful for the first time in seven days.

Nut stayed awake, his hand stroking Hong's silver hair, watching the light paint gold across his unpowdered face. The silence between them wasn't empty anymore. It was full—full of promises and possibilities and eight years of accumulated love finally finding its way home.

When Hong woke up as the sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of purple and orange, the first thing he did was reach for Nut and ask one simple question:

"What are we going to tell the group?"